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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CAR
S/CRS
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
STATE PASS AID FOR LAC/CAR
INR/IAA (BEN-YEHUDA)
WHA/EX PLEASE PASS USOAS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [SNAR](#) [MARR](#) [HA](#)
SUBJECT: POSTCARD FROM LES CAYES

11. (U) Summary. Poloff traveled to Haiti's South Department capital of Les Cayes, near the westernmost end of Haiti's "southern claw" (peninsula), to observe the final round of parliamentary elections. The Les Cayes region is more prosperous and orderly than Port-au-Prince, though drug trafficking contributes to that prosperity. Les Cayes enjoys a dependable supply of electricity and good local infrastructure. The region has been and continues to be calm and stable. The Haitian National Police (HNP) and MINUSTAH troops are visibly present, and local authorities promptly handled minor election-related incidents on election day. Travel to Les Cayes serves as a reminder that Haiti is not uniformly destitute and that there are potential loci for development away from Port-au-Prince. Beneath the calm, however, there remains potential for instability resulting from illegal drug activity, as traffickers will certainly resist serious efforts to root out the influence of drugs on Haiti's southern coast. End Summary.

Geography

12. (U) Les Cayes is a seaside community of roughly 180,000 located on the southwestern coast of Haiti. Surrounded by rugged mountains on 3 sides, Les Cayes lies in a fertile valley approximately 20 miles wide and extending 10 miles inland. The nearby mountains, with the rain they capture and hold, help to provide a constant source of water. The lowland area is verdant, with small well-ordered farms (some irrigated), tree-covered hills, and stunning scenery. It is a beautiful setting, free of the heat and dust of Haiti's central plains and the congestion of Port-au-Prince, and with access to beautiful beaches and islands.

Infrastructure

13. (U) A modern highway in good condition connects Les Cayes to the smaller city of Aquin, roughly forty miles to the east. This highway continues on to Port-au-Prince, but is in poor condition between Aquin and Grand Goave, where it passes through the mountains to the northern side of the southern claw, limiting surface traffic with Port-au-Prince and the larger part of Haiti. The highway from Les Cayes to

the coastal town of Port Salut, about 15 miles to the southwest, is also in good condition. All other roads in this part of Haiti, including the road to the major city of Jeremie to the northwest, are rugged and poorly maintained. However, rural roads are mostly covered with rock and gravel and appear to be passable even in inclement weather with four-wheel drive.

¶4. (U) Because of the difficulty of surface travel outside the region, Les Cayes, principal contact with the rest of Haiti is through the air link to Port-au-Prince. Les Cayes, airport has a paved runway and a new and comfortable terminal. Domestic air carriers provide several flights a day in small one and two-engine aircraft. Les Cayes is only a 40-minute flight from Port-au-Prince.

¶5. (U) Most of the main streets in Les Cayes are paved, clean, and in good condition, but residential streets are rough and poorly maintained, with limited street lighting. The city's level terrain is conducive to travel by bicycle and motorbike. Public transport to nearby communities is readily available on Haiti's ubiquitous privately-owned and brightly-painted buses. Outside of Les Cayes, travel and transport by horse and donkey is common.

¶6. (U) Power from the nearby hydroelectric facility in Sault Mathurine combined with the city's generating plant provides uninterrupted electricity. A trash collection system is obviously in effect as there are few abandoned car chassis or piles of garbage on city streets (unlike Port-au-Prince). The city pumps potable water to neighborhood distribution points. A system of irrigation canals, including some built in the late 1700s, provides water for agricultural purposes.

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¶7. (U) The environment is generally healthy for a tropical area with little development, and basic health care is available in a relatively large, well-equipped public hospital. However, being a wet coastal zone, malaria is still a serious problem in the region.

The Economy

¶8. (U) The economy of the surrounding region is supported by farming, fishing and some tourism. It also receives an economic boost from the transportation of illegal drugs.

¶9. (SBU) According to DEA and MINUSTAH, there is a significant amount of drug traffic which enters the southern coast of Haiti by plane and boat from points originating in Jamaica and South America. An FSN who was a former resident of the area related how, after a major drug shipment arrives, there is a noticeable upswing in local home improvements as homeowners add levels or rooms to their homes, which are typically in a state of perpetual construction.

¶10. (U) Unlike Port-au-Prince, Les Cayes does not have sprawling slums. The city center is commercially active and relatively clean, though buildings and sidewalks are not always in the best repair. Outside the city center, roadside stores and street vendors are busy. At the city's main highway intersection on the edge of town (called "Quatre-Chemins,") where the coastal highway splits off toward Jeremie to the northwest, there is bustling commercial activity and a consistent traffic jam as dozens of buses and trucks stop to pick up and unload cargo and passengers. The neighboring towns are clean and well ordered, with small but active commercial areas, and decent infrastructure (though not quite as good as Les Cayes). There are numerous small sailing vessels engaged in fishing and transport on the surrounding coastal waters. The nearby island of Ile-a-Vache boasts two well-equipped and relatively modern resort hotels.

Security

11 (U) The HNP are visibly present in Les Cayes and in surrounding communities. MINUSTAH also has 558 troops from Argentina and Uruguay, armored personnel carriers and helicopters stationed in the area. The good highway along the coast enables MINUSTAH to promptly deploy forces to the region, s larger coastal towns if necessary.

¶12. (SBU) According to DEA and MINUSTAH, drug trafficking into the area via boat and plane is common. Recently, MINUSTAH troops discovered an illegal airstrip constructed for that purpose. Residents also assume that corruption and complicity in drug trafficking among HNP officers is widespread. Though illicit drug activity is common in the area, there is little drug-related violence. The regional security chief of MINUSTAH believes that may be due, in part, to the reluctance of drug traffickers to draw attention to themselves and to figuratively "fly under the radar."

¶13. (SBU) Comment. By Haitian standards, Les Cayes and its surrounding area is prosperous, tranquil and pleasant, and distinct from the image of sprawling urban squalor and attendant crime and instability commonly associated with Haiti. Indeed, like much of the country outside of Port-au-Prince, the South Department remained calm and free of the crime and instability that plagued Port-au-Prince during 2004 and 2005 and would appear to hold promise as a focus of investment and development. Drug interests play a role in maintaining the prosperity of the region, however, and any serious efforts by the Preval government to root out the influence of drugs in the area will likely generate resistance throughout local government, business, and security circles.
SANDERSON